

1. Introduction

We are proposing to update the allotment management plans for four grazing allotments on the Whitman Ranger District of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

We are proposing to prepare an environmental analysis to determine whether effects of the proposed activities may be significant enough to prepare an environmental impact statement. By preparing this assessment, we are fulfilling agency policy and direction to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)¹ and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations.

1.1 About the Grazing Allotments

The Boulder Creek, West Pine Valley, East Pine Valley, and Ghostbull allotments are located in the Pine Creek watershed on the Whitman Ranger District of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (see map attached).

A grazing allotment is an area designated for livestock grazing. An individual allotment can have lands under several jurisdictions, including Forest Service, other Federal or State agencies or private lands.

These allotments consist of about 93,950 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and 300 acres of private lands that have been waived to the Forest Service for management of livestock grazing for the term of the permit. This private land is managed with NFS lands to meet resource management standards.

You can find rangeland and livestock management direction specific to the Pine Valley geographic area in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (forest plan; USDA Forest Service 1990; pages 4-51 to 4-54) and Hells Canyon Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP; USDA Forest Service 2003; appendix C).

1.2 How is Grazing Managed on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource management Plan (known as the “forest plan”) guides the management of natural resources on the Forest and provides Forest Service staff with an overall strategy for its management. Direction in the forest plan is provided at different levels. For example, direction might apply at a Forest-wide level, by management area, by geographic area, or at the level of the individual allotment.

What This Document Contains:

1. Introduction

- The direction that guides how we manage grazing
- Current grazing management in the area we are analyzing

2. Purpose and Need to Continue Grazing

- What we are proposing and why
- What we hope to achieve
- Who will decide what course of action to take and what will be considered

3. Next Steps

- Timelines
- How to comment

¹ Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR Part 200, Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 and Council of Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1500).

Grazing is one of the many uses allowed on the Forest. Forest Service policy is to make forage available to qualified livestock operators from lands suitable for grazing, provided it is consistent with land management plans and meets the terms of the administrative permit².

The Rescission Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-19) requires each national Forest System unit to establish and adhere to a schedule for completing NEPA environmental analysis on all grazing allotments

In 1990, the forest plan identified standards that provided for the allocation of forage on an allotment specific basis to meet the basic plant and soils needs, and then to allocate additional forage for wildlife and permitted livestock (forest plan; page 4-51 & 4-52). Grazing in these allotments has occurred since before the establishment of the forest, and historic grazing has occurred beginning in the early summer with the movement of livestock through a series of pastures and ending in the fall. The rotation on all four allotments generally occurs starting in the lower elevation pastures and then finishes in the higher elevation pastures (refer to Table 1, attached map). Currently the grazing permittees are authorized to graze 3218 HMs³.

Boulder Creek Allotment

Grazing on the Boulder Creek allotment has occurred since about 1890. From 1906 to 1929 the area was part of the Eagle Valley allotment, and records indicate that the area was heavily grazed. No exact data exist to show cattle numbers on the allotment prior to 1929, but at that point the class of livestock changed from cattle to sheep. Records show that 1200 sheep were permitted from 1948 until 1964 when the number was reduced to 1155. Beginning in 1972, the class of livestock was converted back to cattle, and permitted use of 150 cow/calf pairs from July 1st through September 30th was authorized. This stocking rate has remained unchanged to the current day.

West Pine Valley Allotment

Originally, the West Pine Valley allotment was part of a larger allotment which included the current East and West Pine Valley, the DelCurto, and the Hooker Flat allotments. This rangeland has been used by livestock since the settlement of the city of Halfway in the 1870's. Early records are somewhat scarce but in 1948 approximately 2000 pair of cattle used the allotment. This practice continued through 1957 when a range analysis indicated that the allotment was in poor and declining condition. In 1958 a resource protection agreement was implemented, resulting in a temporary stocking reduction of 50%. During this temporary reduction period (1958-1973), approximately 900 cow/calf pairs were authorized on this allotment. In 1974 the temporary reductions in accordance with the resource protection agreement were changed and a permanent reduction of 40% from the 1957 numbers was implemented. According to records on file, about 572 pairs with a season of use starting June 16th and ending September 30th were using what is now considered the West Pine Valley allotment. After completion of a range analysis and allotment management plan in 1993, this number was reduced by 20% to 458. Due to the cancellation of three grazing permits, the current stocking is 241 pairs of cattle with a season of use starting June 16 and ending September 30.

East Pine Valley Allotment

Originally, the East Pine Valley allotment was part of a larger allotment which included the current East and West Pine Valley, DelCurto, and Hooker Flat allotments (see West Pine Valley description above). Of

² 36 CFR 222.2(c); Forest Service Manual 2203.1

³ HM = Head Month, which equates to a month's use and occupancy of range by one animal over 6 months of age without regard for offspring and daily feed or forage requirements.

the number authorized in 1974 about 590 pairs used what is now the East Pine Valley allotment from July 1st to October 15th. After the completion of a new range analysis and allotment management plan in 1993, this number was reduced by 20% to the current stocking rate of 472 pairs grazing on the allotment from July 1 to October 15.

Ghostbull Allotment

The Turnbull, Ghost Camp, McLain, and Doyle allotments were combined in 1999 to form the Ghostbull allotment. This area has been grazed since before the 1880's, and during these early years both cattle and sheep used the area. However, in 1906, shortly after the National Forest was established, sheep were excluded from the allotment and it became part of the Pine Valley C&H allotment. In 1937 the four allotments mentioned above were separated. The management of these four allotments was executed separately until 1999 when the newly formed Ghostbull allotment was created. The authorized use in 1999 called for the grazing of 126 cow/calf pairs. Currently the Ghostbull allotment is permitted for 104 cow/calf pairs from April 15th through June 15th. There is about 300 acres of privately owned land that has been waived to the Forest Service for management of livestock. This land has permitted grazing for 24 pair from April 15th through June 15th under a Term Private Land Permit.

Table 1. Current Management and pasture rotation for the allotments in the Pine Valley analysis area

Allotment	Numbers	Season of Use	Pasture Rotation
Boulder Creek	150	7/1 - 9/30	Fairview 7/1-7/21
			Carson 7/22-8/4
			Boulder 8/5-9/30*
			Meadow 8/5-9/30*
West Pine Valley	241	6/16 – 9/30	Holbrook 6/16-8/3*
			East Pine 6/16-7/26*
			Schneider 8/4-9/2*
			Trinity 7/27-9/2*
			East Fork 9/3-9/30*
			Sugarloaf 9/3-9/30*
East Pine Valley	472	7/1 – 10/15	Fish Creek 7/1-7/30 and 10/11-10/15*
			Grouse Flat 7/1-7/30 and 10/11-10/15*
			Big Elk 7/31-9/25*
			Fish Lake 7/31-9/25* then 9/26-10/10
Ghostbull	128	4/15 – 6/15	Southern 4/15-4/30
			Turnbull 5/1-5/20
			Ghost Camp 5/21-6/1
			McLain 6/2-6/15

*the total numbers are split in half during the period of use in these pastures

2. Purpose and Need for the Project

The purpose of this project is to update the allotment management to improve resource conditions in a few, small, site specific areas affected by livestock grazing. Further, there is a desire by the public to continue the livestock grazing within these allotments. The need for this project is to manage the grazing activity to provide change to the existing condition of a few, small areas within the allotments so they achieve the forest plan and project-specific desired conditions in the area analyzed.

Project-specific desired conditions are determined through an interdisciplinary team process. A team of range, economic, and other natural resource specialists visit the area we are analyzing, evaluate monitoring and permit administration records, and review objectives outlined in the forest plan for management and geographical areas.

2.1 What is the Purpose of this Proposal?

One purpose of this proposal is the protection of spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout. Bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act⁴, and streams that occur in the upper elevation pastures of the Boulder Creek, West Pine Valley, and East Pine Valley allotment contain designated critical spawning and rearing habitat necessary for bull trout. Livestock grazing can indirectly affect water quality and habitat quality of native fishes and managing for healthy riparian vegetation communities is generally the goal to mitigate these affects. However, during spawning and rearing times livestock can directly affect egg and juvenile mortality and survival by trampling redds and stepping on fish or eggs. Reducing the direct conflicts between livestock and bull trout is a strategy that has been implemented in the past.

Another purpose of this proposal is to continue to improve the condition of vegetation on the landscape. Vegetation was monitored at specific locations across the allotments and found to be mostly in satisfactory condition and in an improving trend. A few areas however, show a need for further improvement. Management changes or modifications in these small areas are needed to improve the vegetation condition and move them toward the desired condition. Specific areas of needed improvement are those upland areas in the eastern portion of the Trinity pasture of the West Pine Valley allotment; lower elevation portions in the south of the Fish Creek pasture; riparian vegetation in the upper reaches of Fish Creek, the lower section of Little Elk Creek, and the Schneider Meadows area of Meadow Creek. The riparian areas are located within the West Pine Valley and East Pine Valley allotments.

Desired condition of the Pine Valley allotments is that vegetation is recognizable as a native plant association. Within individual sites, the species composition mirrors what is expected, and the number or basal cover of these species is stable or increasing. Invasive non-native species, if they exist, should not be the dominant species type and where present are declining in basal cover. If invasive non-native species numbers and cover are stable, or if there is an increase in native species or cover, (from site visit to site visit) these sites may still be moving toward the desired condition. If, due to past disturbance history, a site has transitioned, or crossed a threshold, a reevaluation of the potential must occur to identify the new desired condition.

Our Policy in the Forest Service is to contribute to the economic and social well-being of people by providing opportunities for economic diversity and by promoting stability for communities that depend on rangeland resources for their livelihood (Forest Service Manual 2202.1)

Finally, the proposal will implement the needed management changes to meet the above purpose while contributing to economic and social stability of the individual permit holders and the community.

2.2 Why is there a Need for this Proposal

Nearly all of the capable rangeland is in satisfactory condition⁵ under current management. However, there

⁴ Endangered Species Act 1973 is intended to protect and recover imperiled species and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

⁵ A rangeland is considered to be in satisfactory condition when the desired condition is being met or objectives are being achieved to move the rangeland toward the desired condition or trend.

are a few riparian areas where vegetation and streambanks/streambeds have been impacted and are still in need of further improvement. The majority of these impacts are historic and likely left over from past grazing management prior to 1960. Currently these areas of concern are moving toward the desired condition, but at a slower than expected rate. In particular, the lower reach of Little Elk Creek, and the Mid-reach of Meadow Creek.

Data from upland vegetation transects show that most of the upland range is in satisfactory condition, except a few areas where livestock congregate at salt or water (see picture). The few upland sites that are less than satisfactory still show favorable changes in plant cover and increase in desirable species.

Below are the main areas of concern:

- The area around Trinity station in the east portion of the West Pine Valley allotment Trinity pasture
- Low elevation pasture area in the Fish Creek Pasture of the East Pine Valley allotment
- Meadow Creek
- Little Elk Creek
- Upper reaches of Lake Fork Creek

Trinity Station in the West Pine Valley Allotment



2.3 What Are We Proposing?

We propose to continue to authorize and permit livestock grazing on the Boulder Creek, West Pine Valley, East Pine Valley, and Ghostbull allotments at the same level of use, but with different management or grazing systems. The proposed action is designed to maintain or improve resource conditions by adjusting allowable use in less than satisfactory areas and modifying timing of pasture moves and use.

The proposed action would continue to permit 3218 HMs of grazing, but would change the timing and management system in the West Pine Valley and East Pine Valley allotment (as shown in Table 1). Further, modified utilization standards would be implemented on all sites identified in less than satisfactory condition (Table 2). Specific allotment actions are discussed in the sections below.

Boulder Creek Allotment: Continue current stocking rate and season of use on the allotment. Modify the allotment boundary and remove the area around the West Fork of Pine Creek above Cornucopia and create a new allotment boundary that is 300' west of the main fork of Pine Creek.

West Pine Valley Allotment: Continue current stocking rate and season of use on the allotment. Modify the rotation to remove authorized use from Schneider meadows pasture, and East fork pasture by August 31, and shift this use to the Sugarloaf pasture. This modification will likely include earlier entrance into the Schneider pasture and East fork pasture to coincide with the earlier departure. We also propose to identify upland water sources for development in the Holbrook and East Pine pasture. Upland water sources in these lower elevation pastures would give permittees an option of some utilization later in the season.

East Pine Valley Allotment: Continue current stocking but modify season of use to June 10 – Sept 20. Modify rotation to remove authorized use from the Big Elk pasture by August 31. Identify upland water sources for development in the Grouse Flat pasture. Reduce pressure on the lower reaches of Little Elk creek, and modify utilization standards on the lowest elevation areas in the allotment, specifically C&T PV4 and PV5. This modification of utilization would focus on the utilization of bitter brush in order to promote its expansion.

Ghostbull Allotment: Continue current stocking rate and season of use on the allotment. Private land will continue to be included and permitted through the issuance of a Term Private Land Permit.

Types of Grazing Systems

A **deferred grazing system** modifies the time of year that livestock are grazing any given area. This deferment keeps plants from being grazed during the same life stage in subsequent years. The deferment would aid in seed production and plant establishment.

A **rest/rotation grazing system** discontinues grazing on various parts of a range in succeeding years, allowing each part of the range to rest successively during the growing season. This rest aids seed production, helps seedlings establish, and restores plant vigor. A standard rest/rotation would mean grazing for 1 year and then not grazing (resting) for at least the next year.

Table 2. Modified utilization standards and areas of concern within the Pine Valley Rangeland Planning Area.

Allotment/Pasture	Description	Utilization standard	Key species
East Pine Valley/Fish Creek	The southwest portion of this pasture has been identified as an area of potential concern due to the presence of non-native plants. The utilization of the upland areas above the Clear creek road will be modified and a key area will be created.	35% graze	Bluebunch wheatgrass
		30% browse	Bitterbrush
East Pine Valley/Grouse Flat	The far east portion of the this pasture near Fox Creek has been identified due to the presence of non-native plants and the static trend in the bitterbrush population. The utilization will be modified and a key area will be created.	35% graze	Bluebunch wheatgrass
		30% browse	Bitterbrush
West Pine Valley/Trinity	The area known as Trinity station has received a larger amount of use in the past. This is due in large part to old fences in need of reconstruction. This area is an area of concern due to the static trend in native species and the amount of bare ground.	35% graze	Green Fescue

2.4 Who Will Make the Decision and What Will be Considered

The responsible official will decide whether livestock grazing will continue to be authorized on each allotment. If so, he will outline management objectives and decide on the grazing system to be used and any improvements (such as fences or watering structures) that would need to be built to achieve desired conditions. This information will become part of the term grazing permit through the allotment management plan, which would guide the development of annual operating instructions.

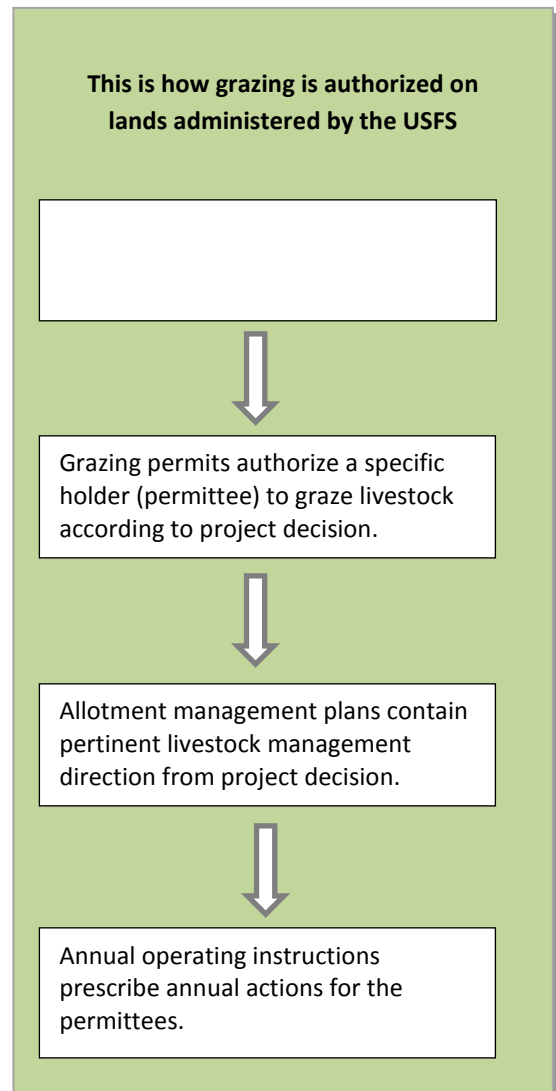
The purpose and need outlined earlier sets the scope of the project and analysis to be completed to help the responsible official make a decision. In making the decision, the responsible official will consider how well the alternatives lead to improving resource conditions affected by livestock grazing; specifically those associated with the purpose and need. Criteria to be considered include:

- Percent composition of and extent of desirable species in the plant community
- Limit of conflict between livestock grazing and spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout
- Percent that livestock production contributes to the social and economic well-being of the local and regional economy

The responsible official will also consider impacts to other resources to determine whether to prepare a finding of no significant impact or an environmental impact statement. This analysis will compare the relevant environmental and social impacts to the benefits of the action, which helps the responsible official to decide which alternative to select.

3 What happens next?

The decision for this project will comply with all federal regulations that pertain to the planning of projects⁶. Rather than being able to seek higher-level review of unresolved concerns after a project decision has been made, those who are eligible will be able to seek that review before project decisions have been reached.



⁶ Section 428 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 includes a provision to establish a pre-decisional objection process (36 CFR 218) for projects and activities implementing land management plans in lieu of post-decisional appeals process (36 CFR 215).

Specific details on how to comply with this process will be included with the forthcoming environmental analysis that will be released for public comment. We anticipate a final decision on this project by September 2017.

3.1 How can you make comment?

For those that are interested in the Pine Valley Rangeland analysis, we ask that you become involved in the planning process by providing comments and suggestions during this scoping period. Your comments will be considered and used to identify issues associated with this proposal, as project planning progresses.

Comments must be received by April 22, 2016, and will become a matter of public record. You may submit either written or oral comments.

- For written comments please submit to Jeff Tomac, District Ranger, Whitman Ranger District, 1550 Dewey Avenue, Suite A, Baker City, OR 97814. You may also Fax written comments to ATTN: Jeff Tomac (541)523-6394. If you would prefer to email your comments please format these comments in plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) and send to comments-pacificnorthwest-wallowa-whitman-whitmanunit@fs.fed.us.
- For oral comments please call Kelby Witherspoon, during normal business hours via telephone, at (541)523-1333 or in person at 1550 Dewey Avenue, Baker City, OR 97814.

Other questions, and additional concerns can be discussed by contacting Kelby Witherspoon (541)523-1333 or Melissa Shelley (541)523-1350.

